

# WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis  
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Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Universidade de Coimbra



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# WORDS HAVE MEANING

Diana Andringa

Because words have meaning, the World Health Organisation urged authorities and the general public to change the phrase “social distance”, used in relation to the rules applied to the COVID-19 threat, to “physical distance”, but the term had already entered our vocabulary and it was not possible to change it.

The Human Rights in Mental Health-FGIP organisation even created the campaign “Mind the Gap” as a reminder that, if physical distance is a necessity in times of pandemic, those who suffer most from the current crisis are many of those who most need social contact – such as institutionalised elderly people, underprivileged immigrant populations and refugees.

This was not the only case of word misuse. At the start of the pandemic, the use of the term “Chinese virus”, in reference to the fact that the first cases appeared in a city in China, caused xenophobic reactions against the Chinese community in several countries, including Portugal.

Numbers also induce reactions. Is providing the number of deaths on a daily basis not somewhat trivialising those deaths, making us indifferent to them? Aren't we devaluing death, one dead person after another?

The pandemic was still in its early stages when the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which oversees the work of humanitarian aid agencies, warned that the constant fear and concern, uncertainty and stress of the popula-

tion during the COVID-19 outbreak could lead to long-term consequences in communities, families and vulnerable individuals. It mentioned, by way of illustration, flaring tempers, anger and aggression against governments and frontline workers, and possible distrust of information provided by the government and other authorities.

This has not prevented the media from giving a voice to precisely those tempers and mistrust, sometimes suffused with obvious political intentions.

Curiously enough, the flaws that the State was being severely accused of tended to be forgiven when they occurred in the private sector. The most blatant case was that of retirement homes, where there was a high number of fatalities, but in relation to which it was the State, not the institution, that was criticised for the lack of contingency plans.

Given this disenchanted picture of the pandemic media coverage, what is the alternative?

I can only think of one alternative: to create a different kind of journalism, one that reads / writes / thinks differently. A journalism that, between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, opts for responsibility. A journalism that does not present facts just because they are available, that does not use words without reflecting on their meaning for those who hear or read them, that ponders on the effects of what it feeds the public.

This may entail re-thinking not only the teaching of journalism (which, unfortunately, in many cases is part of Social Communication courses) but the teaching of language itself (words do have meaning), the habit of writing (characters are meant to be written, not counted), choosing quality above quantity (be it the number of academic citations or likes in social networks), the concern with better – as

opposed to more and faster – information and, finally, ending the *quasi*-monopoly of Social Communications/Journalism training in the newsrooms, with priority being given to a kind of interdisciplinarity that allows them to have specialists in various areas, capable of interpreting texts and information on different themes, assessing their verisimilitude, asking the important questions.